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PORTRAIT OF A LADY:—MADAME DU DEFFAND

BY GAMALIEL BRADFORD

WE know her intimately through her multitude of letters, but we know her only as a blind, infirm old woman, dependent on the kindness of others for amusement, if not for support, and ready to depart at any time from the well-worn and tedious spectacle of flavorless existence, if it had not been for her utter uncertainty as to the world that lay beyond.

She had been very young, however, very young and very gay, as traditions tell us. Born into the most dissipated period of French social life, the regency of the first half of the eighteenth century, she was conspicuous for her charm and wit as well as for the irregularity of her conduct. She is said to have been loved by the Regent himself. In any case, she was most intimate with him and with his favorites, and turned that intimacy to advantage by securing a pension which was of solid value to her in later life. She fascinated others besides the wicked. The great preacher Massillon was summoned by her friends to convert her in early youth. He talked with her very freely, but would make no comment except that she was charming, and when asked to prescribe for her case would suggest nothing but a five-cent catechism.

She was married for convenience, but most inconveniently to her and her husband both. Either he was too fast for her, or too slow; at any rate, he was too dull. She left him, and returned to him, and left him again, and was adrift in the wide world.

It is important to note that with Madame du Deffand, as with some other French women, extreme freedom of living is quite compatible not only with great refinement of taste, but with a singular delicacy and sensitiveness of moral perception. She has an occasional coarseness of speech belonging to her age, but few people have been more alive to fine shades of affection, of devotion, of spiritual tact.

Nevertheless, her early life must be remembered, if we would understand her later. She herself says, "Oh, I should not want to be young again on condition of being brought up as I was, living with the people I lived with, and having the sort of mind and character I have." Dissipation, even less innocent than hers, disorders life, strips it of illusion, takes away utterly and for ever the charm of simple things.

With Madame du Deffand, at any rate, there was no illusion left, and in her gray old age the charm of simple things was gone, and of complex also. If she could have detailed her chill philosophy to Rosalind, that child of dawn would have cried out even more than to the curious Jacques. "I had rather have a fool to make me merry than experience to make me sad." To this disillusioned lady the men and women of the age she lived in were either cynics or pedants, they were bold without force and licentious without merriment, they had little talent and a vast deal of presumption. But so far as her thought and her reading and her knowledge went, the men and women of other times were little better. Most were either fools or knaves, and the few who were not were so painfully conscious of it that living with them was more of a burden than with the others. She had words more bitterly acrid than even La Rochefoucauld's to designate the folly and emptiness and wickedness of life. "I do not know why Diogenes went looking for a man: nothing could happen to him worse than finding one." And she sums it up in one terrible sentence. "For my part, I confess that I have but one fixed thought, one feeling, one misfortune, one regret, that ever I was born."

As a general thing, however, her complaint is less violent than this, and what impresses her in life is not so much its actual evil and misery as its intolerable *ennui*. I must ask the reader's pardon for using the French word, which is, perhaps, by this time almost English. No equivalent exactly fits it. *Melancholy* suggests somewhat more of abstract reflection, and *boredom* more of irritation with external circumstances. Both these are sometimes applicable, but one cannot get along without *ennui* in discussing Madame du Deffand.

This, then, is the deadly burden that life inflicts upon her. The great hours run by, immense, interminable, with nothing to fill them, nothing that inspires her, nothing that amuses her, nothing that distracts her, even. The weary waste of time to come can be judged only by the barren memory of time past, and that holds out neither encouragement nor hope. To be

sure, she readily recognizes that the root of the trouble may be within. A certain lady fails to please her, "but she shared this misfortune with many others, for everything seems insupportable to me. This may very well be because I am insupportable myself." Whatever the cause, the malady is ever present and without cure. "I end because I am sad with no reason for sadness except that I exist."

It might be supposed that, drifting always in such a dead fog of *ennui*, she might bore her correspondents, much more her readers among posterity. She does often. She would very much oftener, if she were not, after all, a Frenchwoman of the wittiest age of French social life, with the sparkle of French vivacity at the end of her pen. Feeble as she was, world-weary as she was, perhaps even in close connection with these conditions, she had an indomitable nervous energy, which responded in the most surprising way to social or spiritual stimulus. Horace Walpole speaks with admirable justice of her "Herculean weakness." She found life dull. Yet out of the dullness she could weave the tissue of a correspondence with Voltaire in which the balance of brilliancy is not always on one side. Could we say more? She goes right to the fact in her letters, speaks vigorously, without tautology or circumlocution. "I care nothing for perfection of style or even for finished politeness. I detest phrases, and energy delights me." With what verve and petulance does she express the emotion of the moment, grave or gay. "Quick, quick, quick, let me tell you about the supper of yesterday, which worried me so for fear I should be dull or crabbed or embarrassed. Nothing of the sort. I never remember in all my life being younger or gayer or merrier."

She had the sheer salt of French wit, too, could tell a story inimitably, or strike off a stinging epigram. It was she who created the well-known phrase in regard to St. Denis's long perambulation with his head off—"It is the first step that costs"; she who said—untranslatably—of the verses that showered on Voltaire's grave, that the great author had become "*la pâture des vers*"; she who remarked of one of her own friends that her wit was like a fine instrument always a-tuning and never played on. Above all, she could make inexhaustible mockery of her own besetting evil. "Write disagreeably, if you like," she urges. "As the man said of the rack, it will make me pass an hour or two, at any rate." And, again: "I hear nothings, I speak nothings, I take interest in nothing, and

from nothing to nothing I travel gently down the dull way which leads to becoming nothing."

Thus the roses strewn over the abyss make it only deeper and blacker and more horrible. Others may take pleasure in her vivacity, may laugh at her stories, and applaud her wit. She takes no pleasure and finds the applause and laughter utterly hollow. Man delights her not, nor woman either. And still those interminable hours drag along, unfilled and unfillable as the sieves of the daughters of Danaus.

To be sure, when all these glittering analyses of nothing were written she was old and blind and sleepless, three things that are apt to dull the quickest spirits. Before she was far past middle life her eyesight failed her and she became the frail, exquisite, touching figure that we see in her best-known portrait, sitting in a great straw-canopied chair—her *tonneau*, she called it—with fine, earnest, sensitive features, stretching out her hands in the groping gesture pathetically characteristic of her affliction. And loss of sight to eyes so keen must leave an appalling emptiness.

Also she was tormented by insomnia, to long, blind, empty days were added solitary nights, when the tossing of weary limbs doubles the tossing of weary spirits. "One goes over and over in one's mind everything that worries and distresses one; I have a gnawing worm which sleeps no more than I do; I reproach myself alone with all my troubles, and it seems clear that I have brought them all upon myself." At 2 A. M. such things do have a most intolerable clarity.

With misfortunes like these, at seventy years old, it is perhaps not wonderful that a lone woman should feel that she had had enough of life. Unfortunately Madame du Deffand's weariness began when she was young and could see—too well. According to Mademoiselle Aissé, after she and her husband had parted, she asked him to come back to her, desiring to re-establish her position in the world. For six weeks things hobbled along. Then she became bored till she could endure it no further, and she made her state of mind so evident, not by ill-temper, but by all signs of depression, that the husband departed, this time for good and all. But who can depict her states of mind better than herself? "I remember thinking in my youth that no one was happy but madmen, drunkards, and lovers." And elsewhere she flings the facts at us like a glass of cold water in the face. "I was born melancholy. My gayety comes only by fits, and they are growing rare enough."

Those things which distract and divert most men and women, those great passions and little pleasures which to some of us seem to fill every cranny of life with business and delight, to her meant simply nothing. If we review them in their larger categories, we shall see her lay her cold, light fingers on them and shrivel them up. It is not deliberate on her part. She would be glad to enjoy as others do. But she has not the power. "It is not my purpose to refuse happiness from anything. I leave open every door that seems to lead to pleasure; and, if I could, I would bar those that let in sorrow and regret. But destiny or fortune has bereft me of the keys that open and close the mansion of my soul."

Nature, the calmest, the most soothing of spiritual consolations? She has no place for it. As a scientific, intellectual pursuit, she blasts it with her savage, untranslatable epigram on Buffon: "*Il ne s'occupe que des bêtes; il faut l'être un peu soi-même pour se dévouer à une telle occupation.*" As for the emotional, imaginative aspects of the natural world, she grudgingly confesses that she might enjoy them if circumstances were favorable: "I am not insensible to natural and rural beauties, but one's soul must be in a very gentle and peaceful mood to get much pleasure from them." Her friend Horace Walpole can hardly be regarded as an ardent nature-lover, he who wrote of general bird-song, "It is very disagreeable that the nightingales should sing but half a dozen songs, and the other beasts squall for two months together." Yet to Madame du Deffand it seemed that even Walpole's delight in country life was quite incomprehensible. "I cannot form any idea of the pleasures you taste in solitude and of the charm you find in inanimate objects."

But the more human interests did not please her any better. Thought, learning, the long effort to understand the secret of life and the springs of human action? Will this dissipate *ennui*? Not hers. It only deadens it.

Politics? The movement of the world, wars, battles, and sieges, deaths of illustrious princes and of unknown thousands? They move not her. High and mighty potencies seem to her perfectly trivial. "Let me whisper in your ear that I make precious little account of kings; their protestations, their retractations, their recriminations, their contradictions, I find them of no more moment than the mixing of a breakfast for my cat." But if you think that at the other extreme she had any more sympathy with the people, just then on the point of

striving so mightily, you are altogether mistaken. "From the Agrarian Law down to your monument, your lanterns, and your black flag, the people, with its joy, its anger, its applause, and its curses, is thoroughly odious to me."

Then there is art, beauty of human creation, to some a resource so great that it overcomes not only tedium but even misery and acute suffering. To this lady with the dead heart beauty makes no appeal whatever. Her blindness, of course, cuts her off from beauty of the eye to which she seldom if ever refers. But the ears of the blind are supposed to be doubly keen, and indeed hers were so. Yet to the nerves behind the ears music was mainly a vexation. In one instance she does, indeed, find the harp delightful. This was her idea of delight: "The thought that one gets hold of nothing, that everything slips away and fails us, that one is alone in the universe and fears to go out of it: this is what occupied me during the music." Do you wonder that she elsewhere writes, "To me music is a noise more importunate than agreeable"?

With literature the case is not much better. Madame du Deffand knew well most of the French writers of her day, and had little esteem for them or their works. Of earlier authors she thought more, but not much. La Fontaine occasionally made her smile. Corneille's heroics enraptured her—for a moment. A minor comedy gives her extreme pleasure; in fact, she weeps during the whole third act, and "they were not tears of bitter anguish, but tears of tender emotion." Her usual state of mind is, however, better expressed in another passage: "Everything I read bores me; history, because I am totally incurious; essays, because they are half platitude and half affected originality; novels, because the love-making seems sentimental and the study of passion makes me unhappy."

For a soul thus blasted by a dry wind from the barren places of this world it would seem as if the thought of another might offer irresistible attraction. It did, and Madame du Deffand is fascinating on the subject. She would like, oh, she would like to practise religion with fervor. She invites a confessor to dine, talks with him, and is quite encouraged. Why should not grace work a miracle for her as well as for others? She reads Saint François de Sales and finds a tender and winning spirit under his "mystical nonsense." She regrets that he is dead. "He would have bored me considerably, but I should have loved him." And in her long hours of insomnia she re-

flects upon the delightful possibility of believing, and builds castles in Spain, or in heaven. "I should read sermons instead of novels, the Bible instead of fables, the *Lives of the Saints* instead of history, and I should be less bored, or no more, than with what I read now, . . . at least I should have an object to which I could offer all my sorrows and make the sacrifice of all my desires."

But it is utterly futile, babble of children, dreams of white nuns bereft of all converse with the heart of man. She was the pupil of Voltaire, the mistress of the Regent, the friend of D'Alembert and Helvétius. To be the friend of these celebrities and of God also would have been too much. Therefore she believed in nothing whatever. Faith, she says, is a devout belief in what one does not understand. We must leave it to those who have it. I have it not. And what belief could overcome the colossal wretchedness of having been born? "Everything that exists is wretched—an angel, an oyster, perhaps even a grain of sand; nothingness, nothingness, what better can we have to pray for?" She did not originate, but she would gladly have accepted, the bitter definition of life as "a nightmare between two nothings."

Thus, you see, she missed, as so many do, the one great privilege of universal skepticism; that is, universal hope. There are thousands who, like her, proclaim that they have no belief in anything, yet, like her, appear to have a most fervent belief in the devil and all his works.

It was natural that one isolated by blindness and unable to get pleasure from the resources of her own soul should turn to society, should try to draw life from constant contact with others who had more of it than she. In none was this restless desire ever more intense than in Madame du Deffand. She seeks people always, goes among them when she can, uses every effort to make them come to her. Her chief dread of poverty is that she may lose the means of attracting company. Even dull company seems to her more tolerable than her own thoughts. And as I have already pointed out, when she got among people they enjoyed and admired her. She was quick, vivacious, brilliant, gave no sign of being bored, if she was so. Some of her words even make one suspect that she exaggerated her troubles and found more in life to please her than she would willingly confess. Hear what she says of a long-projected and finally realized visit: "I have been here five weeks, and I can say, with entire truth, that I have not been bored one single minute,

have not had the smallest mishap or annoyance." Surely the most contented of us can seldom say so much.

But the general tone of her social experience is much better manifested in one long passage, as remarkable for style as for self-revelation: "Men and women alike seemed to me machines on springs, which went, came, spoke, laughed, without thinking, without reflecting, without feeling. Everybody played a part from habit merely. One woman shook with laughter, another sneered at everything, another gabbled about everything. The men's performance was no better. And I myself was swallowed up in the blackest of black thoughts. I reflected that I had passed my life in illusions; that I had dug for myself all the pits I had fallen into; that all my judgments had been false and rash, always too hasty; that I had never known any one perfectly; that I had never been known by any one either, and perhaps I did not know myself. One seeks everywhere for something to lean on. One is charmed with the hope of having found it: it turns out to be a dream which harsh facts scatter with a rude awakening."

By this time it must be very clear that the lady's worst tormentor was herself. If she could have followed the wholesome advice of her exquisite friend, Madame de Choiseul, she would have seen life differently. "Eat little at night, open your windows, drive out often, and look for the good in things and people. . . . You will no longer be sad or bored or ill." It was quite in vain. In such maladies the patient must minister to himself, and this poor patient not only submitted to the black *ennui* of to-day, but doubled it, in fact gave it its chief significance, by dreading the longer, blacker hours of many to-morrows.

So you set her down as a cold, barren, dead old woman, and think you have heard enough of her. But there is more and of singular interest. She had noble and beautiful and winning qualities. For one thing, she was frank, straightforward, and sincere. Indeed, it was the excess of these fine traits that caused her troubles. She would have no illusion, no deception, no sham, nothing but the truth. It was the exaggerated fear of accepting pleasant falsehood which led her to believe that necessarily everything pleasant must be a falsehood. But her honesty draws you to her, even while her misery repels.

Then, curiously enough, though the case is not unprecedented, her very pessimism and failure to find any good in the world resulted from an inherent idealism, from too high expecta-

tions of men and things. Her imagination was so keen that it discounted every pleasure before it came, with resultant disappointment. Her natural instinct was to trust, often unwisely. Then, when she was deceived, she mistrusted and suspected—unwisely also. Primarily she was a dreamer, a hoper, as she herself phrases it in her vivid language, “a listen-if-it-rains, a visionary, who watches the clouds and sees lovely things there that fade even as one beholds them.” And vast dreams dispelled left a darker and a sadder emptiness.

So with people. She demanded perfection, and would take nothing less. Men and women thus tempered go starved and discontented in this far from perfect world. “I pass in review everybody I know and everybody I have known; I do not see one of them without a fault, and I find myself worse than any of them.” But, good heavens, what son or daughter of Adam can endure such a test as that? Yet some are extremely good company, nevertheless.

In other words, her bitter judgments were founded on an over-exacting standard and did not exclude pity or tenderness. Though too impatient to be of great help to others and too critical to be tolerant toward them, she was capable of keen and passionate sympathy, and she held kindness to be a great and most estimable virtue. With the candor which is one of her chief charms she confesses, “I renew every day the resolution to be kind and loving myself. How much progress I make I do not know.”

And following this clue, if we probe still deeper we come across a curious fact in Madame du Deffand’s temperament, which seems to explain many things. Under all her misery, all her discontent, all her boredom, she was aching for love. Perhaps she was incapable of it. Perhaps her keen vision, and her deep mistrust, and her lofty demands on human nature made it impossible for her to give or to receive the passionate affection which might have filled her life. But after careful study it is impossible to resist the conclusion that she more than most women felt the deep need of all women, that the right home and the right husband and the right children might have given her the satisfaction she could not get from books or thought or art or nature.

She herself recognizes this, with lucidity as well as pathos. She repeats often that she loves nothing, less often that some inborn flaw, some unconquerable twist or imperfection, makes her incapable of loving anything. But far more often still does

she cry out for love and tenderness. "Friendship is almost a mania with me; I was born for nothing else." "I love nothing, and that is the true cause of my *ennui*." When she was dying, she saw her secretary, Wiart, who had long served her, in tears. "You love me, then?" she murmured, and so her last words expressed at once the doubt and the longing of her life.

Of her earlier attempts to satisfy this natural instinct three at least are well known to us, and none was perfectly successful. For years she lived in the most intimate relations with Hénault, a man of the highest position and character; but he was not of a nature to feel ardor or inspire it. Their mutual attitude was one of respectful esteem, largely tempered with keen-sighted criticism. Again, Madame du Deffand took into her protection a young orphan relative, Mademoiselle de L'Espinasse, hoping to find a comfort for her age. But the older lady was exacting, the younger restless, and they quarreled and parted by the fault of both—or of neither. Finally, there was Madame de Choiseul, with whom it was not easy to quarrel. Madame du Deffand adored her, called her "grand-mamma," though she was many years the younger, declared over and over again that her love was all she wanted, all her hope and comfort in life. Yet in one of her moments of desperate petulance she could write of even Madame de Choiseul: "She shows a good deal of friendship; and as she has none for me and I have none for her, it is perfectly natural that we should exchange the tenderest expressions in the world." Truly a strange, subtle, and difficult temper, and one ill fitted to separate the evil from the good in the tangled skein of human life.

Then, after all these attempts at love and failures, came a most singular adventure. Madame du Deffand, at seventy, fell in love with a man of fifty. This world-worn, life-wearied, pale, frail, dusty heart was suddenly set beating by another as cold, as disillusioned, if not as bored as hers, that of Horace Walpole, a bachelor, a dilettante, and an Englishman. And this old woman's love was no mere fancy, no indifferent whim, lightly caught and blown off like a feather. It was a real, intense, absorbing, overwhelming passion, like that of a girl of twenty or a woman of forty. "Everybody loves after his own manner; I have only one way of loving, infinitely or not at all." "The thought of you enters into everything I think and everything I do." This is the tone, not for an hour or a day, but over and over and over, for eleven years. Let us note some of the special phases of such an unusual experience.

To begin with, how about Walpole himself? He was not infatuated. He never could have been, and certainly not at fifty, for an aged Frenchwoman. He kept a cool head and saw with perfect clearness the foibles of his ardent correspondent. At the same time his bearing in a rather difficult situation is on the whole loyal and manly. He defended his aged friend against criticism and mockery, and it is from him that we get the finest appreciation of her good qualities, her noble sincerity, her unconquerable vivacity, her social charm.

But if he sees her as we see her, assuredly she does not see him as we see him, or never, never admits that she does. Without accepting all of Macaulay's severe judgment, it is difficult to place Walpole on a very heroic plane. He was kindly, he was gentle, he was generous where it cost him little, he was mildly loyal to his friends. But he was vain, superficial, snobbish while pretending to democracy, incapable of great devotion and of self-forgetfulness. The Walpole that Madame du Defand loved was, however, far different from this. He had the virtues of French and English combined and the vices of no race. As an author, he is in the same class with Voltaire; his letters are like Voltaire's for style and far above for matter. "For style they have had no model and cannot be imitated. They are the sublime of abundance and of naturalness." If you know Walpole, what do you think of that? And his character is as sublime as his letters. He is perhaps a little god-like for perfect friendship, or is she wrong about this? But in the early stages of her passion she proclaims the lover's idea from which she never swerves. "If others saw as clearly as I do, you would be placed first, not only in England, but in the universe; this is not flattery; wit, talent, and the perfection of kindness have never been united as they are in you." What a marvelous light is thrown on the woman's character, as we have studied it, by such a sentence as that!

So she plays, in letter after letter, on the whole compass of the tenderest, most self-abandoning affection. With him in London and herself in Paris, and several days of delaying post between them, she writes incessantly, begging for good news, bad news, any news. His plans—she must know every detail of his plans, what he does, where he goes, whom he sees. His health? Let but the gout touch him and she is in misery. She showers remedies like a quack doctor or an aged nurse. Her distress is everywhere made plain to us by the vivid touches of her quick imagination. "I am like a child hanging

out of a window by a cord and every instant on the brink of falling."

The best remedy for the anxiety of absence would certainly be presence, and she seems to live only in the passionate hope of those rare and hurried visits which brought her beloved to her. Yet, even so, she is most characteristically afraid that when he does come he will be bored. He shall see only whom he wishes when he wishes, provided he gives long hours to seeing her. He comes. She is in Paradise, sits talking with him till two in the morning, and he gets a long letter from her before he rises the next day.

Then he is gone again, and she is in pain again. The memory of past pleasure only makes the pang of separation keener. She is old, old, hardly a particle of life left in her, and she cannot hope to see him ever any more.

A passion like this, full as it is of tragedy and pathos, will at times tempt ridicule. The sincerity and fine intelligence of Madame du Deffand make it impossible for a sympathetic reader even to smile at her. But Walpole was by nature abnormally sensitive to ridicule, as he himself confesses. To be praised as if he were a god and loved as if he were an opera tenor by an old lady of seventy, whom he knew to be living in closest intimacy with the most critical and mocking wits of the world, placed a man of his temper in an exceedingly difficult position. Beware of romance, he cautioned mildly. But she laughed at him. Romance!—at her age! She had never been romantic, had all her life stripped the veil of sentimental illusion from the cold bones of reality. Romance! Her feelings were nothing but common, daylight friendship. In which she was quite wrong, for nothing about her was or could be common or of every day.

So felt Walpole. And he still shuddered at the thought of the vast guffaw of future generations. Destroy my letters, he insisted, and do, do moderate the tone of yours. And he cautioned, and he lectured, as a tutor might lecture a moon-sick girl.

She did not like it; she resented it. The notes she writes so thickly are of painful interest in their sore, hurt, pleading, protesting energy. "If I were as unreasonable as you, you would never hear another word from me. The letter I have just received is so offensive, so extravagant, that I should throw it into the fire unanswered." "Should throw," you notice, not "have thrown." "It is impossible to judge more falsely

than you judge me. . . . You see yourself in everything I say about others, and think I am finding fault with you when I find fault with anyone." "God is not more incomprehensible than you; but if He is not more just, it is hardly worth while believing in Him."

Yet she kissed the hand that chastened her, she turned like a child to its tutor for advice and comfort, with blind trust, blind confidence, blind hope. He is a true physician for the soul, she says, and one who needs no physician for his own. She only wishes that he might have had control of her from childhood. How different she would have been! "You would have formed my taste, my judgment, my discernment, you would have taught me to know the world, to mistrust it, to despise it, to enjoy it; you would not have bridled my imagination, or blighted my passions, or chilled my soul; but you would have been like a skilful dancing-master, who keeps the natural poise of health and vigor and adds to it finished grace."

So she loved for eleven years, and died with this final illusion like the cross in her hands and the sacred wafer at her lips. You think she was pitiaibly infatuated. Perhaps she was. But it was an infatuation that not only furnished the clue to her whole life, but in a manner sanctified it.

It is a curious thing that the two greatest women letter-writers of France, perhaps of the world, Madame de Sévigné and Madame du Deffand, should each have built the main fabric of their correspondence on an exaggerated, not to say abnormal, affection. It is far more curious that this affection should be with Madame de Sévigné the one flaw in a singularly well-balanced character, and with Madame du Deffand the most marked symptom of health in a character otherwise erratic, distorted, and unsound.

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